

The University of Chicago

LYMAN BEECHER  
AND CONNECTICUT ORTHODOXY'S  
CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE  
UNITARIANS, 1819-26

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN  
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR  
OF PHILOSOPHY

1940

By  
SIDNEY E. MEAD

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LYMAN BEECHER AND  
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AGAINST THE UNITARIANS, 1819-1826

SIDNEY E. MEAD

*Chicago, Illinois*

In 1819 the orthodox Congregationalists of Connecticut suddenly turned from almost complete absorption in the internal affairs of their own little state of "sober habits," and launched a determined offensive against the Unitarians of Boston and vicinity. This campaign they carried on with vigor through the following seven years. Then they dropped it almost as suddenly as they had taken it up, and became involved in dissension within their own ranks, climaxed by the controversy between Nathaniel W. Taylor of Yale and Bennet Tyler of East Windsor and Hartford. This study sketches the background and some of the events of the campaign against the Unitarians in an attempt to indicate why the Connecticut group were not involved before 1819, why they conducted the campaign as they did, and why they suddenly lost interest in 1826. Since Lyman Beecher, minister at Litchfield, Connecticut, was the outstanding leader of the orthodox during this period, the answers to these questions are to be found largely in a study of his work.

The spiritual deadness generally prevailing during the half century following the Great Awakening in New England tended to obscure the real differences developing between the orthodox Calvinism which dominated western New England, especially Connecticut, and the liberal theology of the Mayhew and Chauncey type, which was centered in Boston, grown somewhat mellow through the dominance of a class engaged in foreign commerce and acquainted with the Oriental and other religions.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Connecticut's consociated Congregationalism of the Saybrook Platform (1708) drew closer to Presbyterianism, and plans pushed by such leaders as Timothy Dwight and Jonathan Edwards the younger eventuated in the Plan of

<sup>1</sup> George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America* (Boston, 1902), 283; Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865* (New York, 1936), 60-72.



Union of 1801, which practically Presbyterianized the Connecticut churches.<sup>2</sup> This served to distract Connecticut's attention from the developments about Boston. But, as Williston Walker observed,<sup>3</sup> one looking back can readily see that if and when a renewed general interest in religion arose, or when one party should carry an aggressive campaign into the territory where the other was strong, open separation could be the only result.

The settlement of Jedediah Morse over the First Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on April 30, 1789, may conveniently be taken as the opening of just such an aggressive campaign by the orthodox. For thirty years (1789-1819), the history of the relationship between the two parties can be told in terms of Morse's determined efforts to bring about the separation of the Unitarians from the orthodox.<sup>4</sup> He led the orthodox opposition to the appointment of a liberal to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity in Harvard College, but was unsuccessful, and Henry Ware was appointed in 1805. The controversy had emphasized the party differences. But it had also drawn the Old Calvinists and Hopkinsians into closer co-operation, and largely through the efforts of Morse and Woods, their separate periodicals were merged in the *Panoplist* in 1805, and Andover Theological Seminary was opened in 1808. Morse continued the systematic campaign against the Unitarians, bringing the orthodox Edward Dorr Griffin, a Presbyterian, to the Park Street Church of Boston, in 1809. Pastoral exclusion began to be practiced by both parties.

Early in 1815 Morse exploded a real bomb, by financing the publication of *American Unitarianism*,<sup>5</sup> which was reviewed

2 William Warren Sweet, *The Presbyterians 1783-1840: A Collection of Source Materials*. Vol. II of *Religion on the American Frontier* (New York, 1936), 38; Winfred E. Garrison, "Interdenominational Relations in America Before 1937," *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, 2d Series, IX (1934), 62-63; Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), 525.

3 *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, Vol. III of *The American Church History Series* (New York, 1894), 306.

4 This is abundantly documented by the study of James King Morse, *Jedediah Morse: a Champion of New England Orthodoxy* (New York, 1939).

5 *American Unitarianism: Or a Brief History of "the Progress and Present State of the Unitarian Churches in America."* Compiled from Documents, and information communicated by the Rev. James Freeman, D.D., and William Wells Jun. Esq. of Boston, and From Other Unitarian Gentlemen in this Country, By Rev. Thomas Belsham. Extracted from his "Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend Theophilus Lindsay," printed in London, 1812, and now published for the bene-



in the *Panoplist* of June, 1815.<sup>6</sup> The review stressed the identity of the American with the English Unitarians, dwelt upon their dishonesty in trying to conceal their true opinions, and made a plea for separation. The controversy now broke out in earnest. There was a sharp exchange of letters between William Ellery Channing and Samuel Worcester. Unitarian sentiments were most plainly expressed in the publication by a layman, John Lowell, of *Are You A Christian or a Calvinist?*—a seventy-two page pamphlet in which the author complained that Morse and Worcester had falsely confused Arians and Socinians, and had imputed to all Unitarians the Socinian views of Belsham and the English Unitarians. He attacked the famous five points of Calvinism with some vehemence, and assailed Morse and Worcester personally for their conspiracy to “write down all who ventured to think for themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Jedediah Morse had at last been successful in causing the open separation between orthodox and Unitarians which he had long desired, and in fostering in the minds of both a strong consciousness of party, which was to lead to Channing’s famous Baltimore sermon in 1819.

But, it is to be noted, there is little indication that the “Philistic Giant, imported from Connecticut,” as G. E. Ellis called Morse,<sup>8</sup> had as yet drawn the religious leaders of his native state into the controversy. Indeed, there is little indication that they were more than mildly interested in the events taking place in Massachusetts. It is significant that Timothy Dwight, in his sermon at the opening of Andover Seminary in September, 1808,<sup>9</sup> made no direct reference to the controversy between orthodox and liberals which had resulted in the found-

*fit of the Christian Churches in this Country, without note or alteration* (Boston, 5th ed., 1815). The title alone is sufficiently explanatory. See also, Morse, *Jedediah Morse*, 145.

6 “Review of American Unitarianism,” *Panoplist*, XI (June, 1815), 241-272. This review, attributed to Jeremiah Evarts, was published anonymously. Morse (*Jedediah Morse*, 146) says it is likely that Jedediah Morse collaborated in its writing. He was almost universally blamed for it.

7 *Are You a Christian or a Calvinist? or Do You Prefer the Authority of Christ to that of the Genevan Reformer? Both the Form and Spirit of these Questions Being Suggested by the Late Review of American Unitarianism in the Panoplist, and By the Rev. Mr. Worcester’s Letter to Mr. Channing, to which are added some strictures on both these works* (Boston, 1815), 3-4.

8 *Half-Century of the Unitarian Controversy*, 17, quoted in Morse, *Jedediah Morse*, 100.

9 *A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Theological Institution in Andover: and at the Ordination of Rev. Eliphalet Pearson LL.D. September 28th, 1808* (Boston, 1808).

ing of that institution, though his correspondence with Morse offers abundant evidence that he knew what was taking place.

In partial explanation of this may be offered, of course, the proverbial provincialism of the "snug little commonwealth," and its Presbyterianized Congregationalism, more concerned with religious movements in New York and the growing West, than in Massachusetts. But, no doubt, the chief explanation of Connecticut's apparent lack of interest in the Unitarian controversy up to this point is that she was busy with her own internal affairs, and that her leaders were more interested in the practical questions of church polity than in doctrinal subtleties. Only after 1818, when the disestablishment of the church in Connecticut freed its leaders for larger fields, and consideration of the Dedham case emphasized the Unitarian threat to the unity of the Congregational churches, did the orthodox of Connecticut enter the lists against the Unitarians. These two points require further explanation.

The leadership of the Connecticut Standing Order was centered at Yale College from the time that Timothy Dwight became its president in 1795. Dwight was a man with a mission. He traced all the religious deadness and most of the political ills of the period following the Revolution to the infiltration of French infidelity, and waged a valiant war against it until he died in February, 1817. But his real argument against infidelity was not theological or metaphysical at all, but moral. That is, he pictured in vivid terms the inevitable tendency of infidelity to destroy the basis for true religion, to undermine good morals, and to do away with sound government. With equal vehemence he asserted the tendency of Christianity to undergird all three. With tremendous energy, and a gift of language that Parrington once compared to the flow of water from a pipe without a faucet, Dwight urged alike upon the callous students of Yale College, and the eminent rich and well born who gathered in New Haven to attend the courts and legislative sessions, the immediate necessity of choosing between Christianity with sound government, and infidelity with anarchy. Under the impact of his message, infidelity in the college "skulked and hung its head," and ceased to be "fashionable or even respectable" among Connecticut's eminent men.

This message formed the basis for the new revivalism. Revivalistic activity demands the simplification of all problems,



so that they may be presented to the prospective convert as a choice between but two alternatives. This Dwight did in presenting his choice between Christianity and infidelity. He worked valiantly to save souls from a hell in the hereafter, but the fact that the circumstances of the time meant that the same souls were also saved from a very tangible Republican infidelity, and added to the strengthening of the Federalist Standing Order, by no means hurt his cause. Immersed in this very practical revivalistic activity, Dwight seems to have taken theology in his stride. Frank Hugh Foster, who did so much to trace the development of New England theology, and who was probably more conversant with the writings of its proponents than anyone of the last generation, bore eloquent testimony to this fact. His treatment of Dwight is sketchy, and he complained, almost plaintively, that Dwight's system "represented no special school in New England Divinity."<sup>10</sup>

Inevitably, in Connecticut, where the church was established, and circumstances identified the rising Jeffersonianism with infidelity, Dwight's battle for Christianity became a battle to maintain the Standing Order against the encroachments of infidel Republicanism and the sects. Lyman Beecher, Dwight's pupil and friend, became the leader in this campaign to save the Standing Order. He, like Dwight, reduced the conflict to its simplest terms. Democracy, he said, "included nearly all the minor sects, besides the Sabbath-breaking, rum-selling, tippling folk, infidels, and ruff-scuff generally," and it "made a deadly set at us of the Standing Order."<sup>11</sup> "It was the anticipation of the impending revolution and downfall of the standing order," he said later, "that impelled me to the efforts I made at that time to avert it."<sup>12</sup> Beecher's "efforts" in the cause included a state-wide organization of the supporters of the Standing Order, the promotion of extensive revivals, and the launching of a periodical to disseminate the orthodox views. The scope and significance of his work between 1811 and 1818, has generally been overlooked.

Where Dwight had persuaded the eminent men to give up infidelity and espouse Christianity, Beecher organized them into an effective machine. In July, 1812, he was pushing the

10 *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (Chicago, 1907), 361-362.

11 Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc. of Lyman Beecher, D.D.*, ed. Charles Beecher (New York, 1866), I, 342.

12 *Ibid.*, I, 260.



organization of a "reformation society," that might "awaken the attention of the community to our real state and danger."<sup>13</sup> Traveling widely, and writing many letters, he pressed for organization. "I expect to be in Hartford soon on my way to Guilford," he wrote a colleague, indicating his activities in the interests of the proposed society, "and shall return by New Haven. Shall confer with Governor Treadwell, Mr. Yates, Mr. Chapin, Dr. Dwight, and such of the brethren as I may see."<sup>14</sup>

Under this impetus, a group of Connecticut dignitaries met in New Haven in October, 1812, and voted unanimous approval of the organization of "a society for the suppression of Vice and the Promotion of good Morals." They appointed a committee of twenty-six, representing every section of the state, to prepare an address to the public. Beecher then began to exert all his great influence to push the proposed organization. He made its political, as well as its religious, purpose clear. "The time has come," he wrote to Asahel Hooker in November, "when it becomes every friend of this state to wake up and exert his whole influence to save it from innovation and democracy." For "if we stand idle, we lose our habits and institutions piecemeal, as fast as innovation and ambition shall dare to urge on the work." And why, he inquired,

"should this little state be sacrificed? Why should she, at such a day as this, standing alone amid surrounding ruins, be torn herself by internal discord? What a wanton effort of ambition. Lord, what is man? . . . If this thing succeeds, it is because God has given us up to madness that He may destroy us."<sup>15</sup>

Other societies, besides the Moral Society, were organized. Each had a stated, specific task, but all contributed to the good of the Standing Order. Purcell has made it clear that the Missionary Society, the Connecticut Bible Society, the New England Tract Society, the Domestic Missionary Society For Connecticut and Vicinity, the Ministers' Annuity Society, and the Charitable Society, were all political as well as religious in purpose and effect.<sup>16</sup> Beecher was very active in the organization and conduct of all these societies—work that kept him extremely busy. "It is impossible to make you or anyone else

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 253.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 254.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 257-258.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (Washington, 1918), 324-326.

understand the amount of labor we went through in these days in trying to preserve our institutions and reform the public morals," he wrote later.<sup>17</sup>

The second feature of Beecher's campaign to save the Standing Order was the promotion of revivals in the churches. He himself traveled widely through the state, engaged in revivalistic preaching, and encouraged the settled ministers to take up "systematic itineration" as a means of pushing revivals in all the churches. By the summer of 1813 the practice seems to have been quite general, and revivals were reported from many places. These revivals, as Beecher conducted them, were a means of bringing his cause before the public mind.

The third feature of his campaign was the launching of a periodical. A suggestion from Dr. Dwight, said Beecher, led "to a few of us, . . . writing a series of tracts . . . on existing questions. Several were prepared and published." For a few pious ministers to get together and write "half a dozen or so" tracts "on existing questions" sounds innocent and natural enough, until we consider when they did this and the nature of the "existing questions" as they conceived them. Through the year 1815, the obvious enemies of the Standing Order were the democrats, the sects, and the "ruff-scuff generally," as Beecher said. There is little evidence that the dignitaries of the Standing Order considered it necessary to write tracts against the sects and their doctrines. But in the meeting in New Haven on February 21, 1816, the Episcopalians, "who had always been staunch Federalists . . . went over to the democrats,"—and that was another matter.

Early in 1818, three of the tracts appeared, leaving no doubt as to their intent and purpose. The first, entitled, *Plain Reasons For Relying on Presbyterian Ordination*, had an obvious anti-Episcopal bearing. A second, called *General Reasons For Believing the Doctrines of Grace*, upheld the Calvinistic doctrines of the Standing Order as opposed to the Arminian doctrines of the Episcopal church. The third, by Nathaniel W. Taylor, minister at New Haven, entitled *Man, A Free Agent Without the Aids of Divine Grace*, was in part an irritating attack on the local Episcopal church and its rector. But these tracts paled into insignificance when, in Beecher's words, Bennet Tyler "wrote a pungent thing on Episcopalianism." It

<sup>17</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, I, 329.



was published anonymously as *A Serious Call to Those Who Are Without the Pale of the Episcopal Church: to Which is Added an Appendix, Containing Animadversions Upon the Conduct of Inconsistent Churchmen*. By "A Consistent Churchman." This bitterly sarcastic attack on the Episcopal Church drew a storm of protests from the members of that body, who rose in self-defence. Naturally enough, when the "association of gentlemen," who had produced it, issued the first number of *The Christian Spectator* in January, 1819, the Episcopalians assumed it was aimed at them, even though it professed that its purpose was the inculcation of those "doctrines of grace . . . which have ever prevailed in the great body of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches." They rose to the defense of the church with a counter publication called *The Watchman*. They did not know as yet that Beecher had become fraternally disposed toward them, and had turned to face a new foe.

Thus as a result of Beecher's campaign to save the Standing Order, Connecticut Congregationalism in 1818 was well organized, revivals were being promoted widely throughout the state as a means of carrying the issues to the people in the churches, and a group in New Haven, Beecher's "general staff," were ready to issue a periodical to uphold their views.

But the Standing Order was doomed. The election of May, 1818, made disestablishment certain. To Beecher, who could not then conceive of Congregationalism without state support, loss of the establishment meant the passing of true religion, and he sank into a depression low even for that volatile man. Said his son, Charles, editor of the *Autobiography*,

I remember seeing father the day after the election, sitting on one of the old-fashioned rush-bottomed kitchen chairs, his head drooping on his heart, and his arms hanging down. "Father," I said, "what are you thinking of?" He answered solemnly, "The Church of God."<sup>18</sup>

But soon thereafter, Beecher saw a great light, and a revolutionary idea found lodging in his mind—true religion had survived disestablishment. After the revolution happened, he wrote with as much cheerfulness as he had previously shown depression: "our people thought they should be destroyed if the law should be taken away from under them . . . But the effect, when it did come, was just the reverse of the expectation. Our

<sup>18</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, I, 344.

fears had magnified the danger."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he continued, disestablishment was a blessing. It made the churches more self-reliant. It removed the cause of animosity between the Congregationalists and the minor sects. It made the ministers even more influential than they had been before. In brief, disestablishment meant that a great cause of internal strife in Connecticut was removed, and the leaders of the church, for the first time, were free to turn their attention to other matters.

Meanwhile, the controversy in Massachusetts was being waged with increasing intensity on both sides. Churches were being split one after another. The climax came with the division of the church in Dedham in 1818, which led to the decision, first by an ecclesiastical council, and later by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in 1820, that "an orthodox majority of church members might be overruled in questions affecting church property by the society or parish, in which the actual communicants might be and frequently were in the minority."<sup>20</sup>

This case dramatized the Unitarian threat to the unity of the churches, and seems to have aroused Lyman Beecher. With remarkable suddenness he forgot his differences with the Democrats, the sects, and the Episcopalians, and turned his full attention, for the first time, to the Unitarians. The installation of his young friend and theological pupil, Elias Cornelius, as associate pastor of the Tabernacle Church of Salem, in July, 1819, gave him his first opportunity for a direct attack. Significantly enough, it was not directed against Unitarian doctrines, but against their supposed threat to the constitution of the local church.<sup>21</sup> He argued that the local church was made up of a voluntary association of the regenerate, that Unitarians explained away the necessity for regeneration, and hence undermined the whole system of the churches.

But Beecher was not the man to wage individual warfare—he loved organizations, and he thrived on crusades. Now, having seen the great light, having been convinced that Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and the sects must unite against their common enemy, the Unitarians, he turned his trained army to an attack on the new foe.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 451-452.

<sup>20</sup> William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York, 1930), 349.

<sup>21</sup> Lyman Beecher, "The Designs, Rights, and Duties of Local Churches," *Works*, II, 204-243. See also, Leonard Bacon, *Sermon at the Funeral of Rev. Lyman Beecher, D.D.*, in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, Jan. 14, 1863 (New York, 1863), 17.



"You are right in thinking the Unitarians are gaining," he wrote to a young colleague.

Their power of corrupting the youth of the commonwealth by means of Cambridge is silently putting sentinels in all the churches, legislators in the halls, and judges on the bench, and scattering everywhere physicians, lawyers, and merchants. It is also true that their concentration and moneyed resources give them great advantages, which we can balance only by arousing and concentrating the energies of the orthodox churches. *This, this, must be our first, second, and third work.*<sup>22</sup>

So Beecher plunged into the new crusade to arouse the orthodox churches, and to cast out the Unitarians, making use of the methods and weapons that had been developed in the fight to save the Standing Order — revivals, and "writing down," as it was called. He sensed the futility of unsupported literary attack. "The Unitarians," he wrote, "cannot be killed by the pen," for "they do not live by the pen. They depend upon action, and by action only can they be effectually met. Hitherto they have had easy work while mingled with the orthodox, coaxing some, threatening others, and hampering all." And "there is no remedy while the orthodox sleep, and Socinians are allowed to lodge in the same fold with us."<sup>23</sup> The action Beecher contemplated was revivalism.

Back of his faith in revivals lay his belief that Unitarianism was largely a movement among a few leaders, and that the defection of whole churches was possible only because the members were ignorant of true orthodox doctrines. "The fact is," he wrote to Nathaniel W. Taylor, in suggesting what ought to be preached in Boston early in 1823,

"that the Unitarian people, with the exception of a few *veterans*, are no more Unitarians than any uninformed people, who know nothing except that they do not believe in Calvinism as caricatured *in terrorem*. And when the truth, divested of obnoxious terms, is mildly, and kindly, and luminously explained and earnestly applied, they have no shield, and are impressed and awakened, and even easier than some of our hardened orthodox hearers."<sup>24</sup>

Hence, he continued, "we need now no ordination, knocking down sermons. These have had their use and done their work." But

"the two leading objects demanded here are to remove misapprehension and prejudice concerning our doctrines, and to commend them powerfully to

<sup>22</sup> *Autobiography*, I, 449.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 542.

the conscience; and then to extend clear conceptions of their nature and evidences of vital religion and of the several Christian graces."<sup>25</sup>

The Unitarians from the beginning had pressed the charge that the doctrines of Calvinism were harsh, and inconsistent with the moral perfection of God. Stuart, Woods, and others, who had defended Calvinism with biblical and philosophical arguments, had not met this charge squarely. Beecher did, by seeking deliberately to restate and soften the doctrines, and thus to "remove misapprehension and prejudice" concerning them. His primary motive was not to defend Calvinistic principles, but to lure people away from Unitarianism and back into the orthodox fold. The men who stood by doctrinal principles regardless of consequences, could not understand, and contested bitterly, what to them appeared Beecher's easy tendency to compromise principles for the sake of polity. He, in turn, answered very practically upon one occasion, that the people who had been taught by the Unitarians that the God of the Calvinists damned mankind for what they could not help, "did not need high-toned Calvinism on the point of dependence; they had been crammed with it, and were dying with excessive aliment, and needed a long and vigorous prescription of free-agency to produce an alternative."<sup>26</sup>

It is clear, then, that the revivals Beecher sponsored were definitely educational in purpose—a means of weaning people away from Unitarianism, by showing them that the alleged harshness of Calvinism was misrepresentation. He, like Timothy Dwight, was never a mere evangelistic soul-saver, but a statesman in the church. The souls he was interested in saving were saved from Unitarianism, as well as from a hell in the hereafter, and they were added to the membership of the orthodox churches. In such educational revivals he placed great faith. "The Unitarians will gain the victory if we are left without revivals," he asserted, "but they will perish by the breath of His mouth and the brightness of His coming if revivals prevail."<sup>27</sup>

But revivals alone were not enough. Even though the Unitarians could not be killed by the pen, nevertheless the pen must be wielded valiantly in the battle. "We feel the danger of

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 389.



allowing the Unitarian heresy too much popular headway," Beecher wrote,

"lest the stream, like Toleration, once running, should defy obstruction and sweep foundations and superstructures in promiscuous ruin. An early and decided check followed up will turn back this flood, and save the land from inundation. But to accomplish this, as Voltaire said to the abbe, 'We *must* be read'."<sup>28</sup>

Hence the tract writers at New Haven, who had aroused the ire of the Episcopalians, now turned with equal avidity against the Unitarians, and with such celerity that, as we have mentioned, the Episcopalians generally thought that their first issue of the *Christian Spectator* (January, 1819), was aimed at their church.

By the opening of 1821, Connecticut orthodoxy had been thoroughly aroused to the threat of Unitarianism, and under Beecher's leadership, the aggressive campaign of revivals and "writing down" was in full swing. Strong orthodox ministers had been placed in strategic positions within the Unitarian domain; Cornelius at Salem, Wisner and Sabine in Boston. Stuart had answered Channing, Woods was doggedly carrying on a debate with Ware. *The Christian Spectator* was systematically harassing the Unitarian writers. Beecher himself was pushing revivals in several places at once. The importance of this systematic revivalism has probably been underestimated. It was Beecher's method of carrying the issues, and the claims of orthodoxy, to the people in the churches. It is here suggested that the revivals offer one of the most fruitful explanations of the fact that Unitarianism hardly spread beyond the Boston area.

It remains then, to suggest the peculiar features and significance of the Connecticut attack on Unitarianism. Both Calvinists and Unitarians realized, as soon as their differences became the subject of public debate, that their fundamental divergence was in their respective views of human nature. Calvinists held that man was depraved in such a way that only a divine miracle could restore to him a holy heart. Unitarians held that such divine intervention was not essential, but rather that development of man's natural faculties sufficed. With this issue remaining central, the debate may be said to have passed rapidly through three phases, with the emphasis successively on the biblical, the philosophical, and the "moral ten-

dency" arguments.<sup>29</sup> In a very real sense, however, the latter was the basic argument of the Unitarians from the beginning.

Channing, in his famous sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks in 1819, proposed to discuss Unitarian Christianity under the two heads: principles of scriptural interpretation, and "doctrines which the Scriptures, so interpreted, seem to us to express." Yet it is clear that his chief objection to orthodox Calvinism is that

"it tends to discourage the timid, to give excuses to the bad, to feed the vanity of the fanatical, and to offer shelter to the bad feelings of the malignant. By shocking, as it does, the fundamental principles of morality, and by exhibiting a severe and partial Deity, it tends strongly to pervert the moral faculty, to form a gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion, and to lead men to substitute censoriousness, bitterness, and persecution, for a tender and impartial charity. . . . This system . . . begins with degrading human nature."<sup>30</sup>

The first champions of orthodoxy apparently did not grasp the significance and weight of this argument from "moral tendency." They met the Unitarians along the old, accepted lines of theological debate. Moses Stuart produced in his *Letters to Dr. Channing* the outstanding biblical argument for the orthodox position. Leonard Woods' writings against Henry Ware constituted the outstanding philosophical defence of orthodoxy. But these exchanges resulted only in a stalemate, in which each side resorted to mere reiteration of its position. Starting with different basic assumptions, the parties did not get onto common ground for debate. Only when the orthodox produced champions who grasped the importance of the argument from "moral tendency" could the discussion move on to such common ground.

The New Haven men, led by Beecher, were peculiarly fitted to defend orthodoxy and attack Unitarianism on the basis of the argument from moral tendency. Dwight had successfully overthrown infidelity, by forcefully pointing out its degrading moral and social tendencies to the men of influence. Beecher

29 Professor C. H. Faust, in his excellent article, "The Background of the Unitarian Opposition to Transcendentalism," *Modern Philology*, XXXV (February, 1938), 297-324, calls attention to these three phases of the controversy, quoting an anonymous Calvinistic reviewer of Channing's "Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety" (*A review of the Rev. Dr. Channing's discourse preached at the dedication of the Second Congregational Unitarian Church, New York, December 7, 1826* [Boston, 1827], 3-13), as the basis for his own observations. The present writer shares Professor Faust's conviction that this aspect of the controversy has not received the attention and treatment its importance deserves.

30 *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D., with an Introduction* (New and Complete Edition, Rearranged; Boston, 1888), 377-378.



had campaigned against democracy and the sects, on the ground that their triumph forebode no good for church or state. He and his "general staff" at New Haven had realized from the beginning of the revivalistic defence of orthodoxy the vital necessity of making their Calvinistic doctrines less shocking to the moral sensibilities of their day, and had emphasized the impotence of "unitarian negations" to "talk to the conscience and make people feel." It is not surprising, then, that when these veterans turned their attention to Unitarianism, they gave the exponents of that system the first real answer to the charge that the moral tendency of Calvinism was degrading.

Early in 1820, Andrews Norton, newly appointed Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard, published his "Thoughts on True and False Religion,"<sup>31</sup> in which he proposed to distinguish between the two "by the effects of each on the moral character of those who embrace their doctrines." The harsh doctrines of orthodox Calvinism, he argued, tended to degrade the moral character of those who embraced them. To this charge Nathaniel W. Taylor of Yale, Beecher's "theological brains," replied that Norton's argument was absurd, since he was obviously arguing from what he *supposed* the effect would be upon himself, what the effect of Calvinistic sentiments actually were upon professing Calvinists. Further, Taylor pointed out, the real tendency of Norton's line of argument was toward a rejection of revelation, since Norton proposed to accept of revealed religion only what he supposed would have a good moral effect upon himself.<sup>32</sup>

The thoroughness of Taylor's review is indicated by the fact that the Unitarians immediately dropped the argument from "moral tendency." But Taylor had raised more than he could lay, when he accused Norton of misrepresenting Calvinism on the doctrine of human depravity. For the New Haven men themselves were a bit hazy on the doctrine, having, in their zeal as revivalists, reduced all sin to voluntary transgression of known law. This, of course, answered effectively the Unitarian charge that the Calvinists' God made man responsible for what he could not even choose to avoid. But it also left the question open of why all men sin—in other words, the question of depravity. This the Unitarians were quick to see. In a long

31 *The Christian Disciple, New Series*, II (1820), 337-365.

32 "Review of Erskine's Evidences, and Norton on True and False Religion," *The Christian Spectator*, IV (1822), 249-264; 299-318; 445-448; 667-668.

review, probably written by Norton,<sup>33</sup> it was argued that the fact that the New Haven men will not admit the clear implications of their doctrine of depravity does not mean that "we have misrepresented Calvinists," but only that "the modern Orthodox of New England are not Calvinists."

"They may hold another system resembling Calvinism, and better than Calvinism, but not, unless our logic fails us, a system which shall be at once the same with Calvinism, and yet different from it. If the Orthodox in this section of our country feel themselves to be aggrieved, because they have been represented as holding the principles and doctrines of Calvinism, let them renounce that system."<sup>34</sup>

This was a telling argument, for a large group of Calvinists in Connecticut, and the solid Old School group in the Presbyterian church, had long been suspicious of the New Haven doctrinal trend away from strict Calvinism. Here, then, the controversy definitely entered another phase, in which the Unitarians began to dwell upon the obvious doctrinal differences between the "nominal Calvinists" of New England, and the real Calvinists of the conservative wing in New England, and in the Presbyterian church.

Apparently, the New Haven men did not appreciate the new turn the discussion had taken, or the danger it threatened to their continued leadership. "We are not to be gulled into the admission that those only are Calvinists, 'properly so called,' who adopt the exact creed of Calvin," they replied in a review which bears the marks of Taylor's work.<sup>35</sup> "Such a Calvinist is not to be found in this country." "The modern Orthodox of New England not Calvinists?" the reviewer asks. "Who then are Calvinists in the Unitarian vocabulary?" Thus the New Haven group were led to emphasize the doctrinal differences existing between themselves and others within the orthodox ranks, and between New England Calvinists and the Calvinists further south. They had been led to ask the fatal question—"Who then are Calvinists?" Once that question was asked, Calvinists of all shades, who had overlooked their differences in facing the common threat of Unitarianism, began to demand an answer. Thenceforth, the Unitarians did not permit the orthodox to forget that question. Practically every one of

33 "The State of the Calvinistic Controversy," *The Christian Disciple, New Series*, V (May and June, 1823), 212-235.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

35 "Review Reviewed," *The Christian Spectator*, VI (1824), 369.



their reviews and controversial articles played upon the "peculiarities" of the New Haven orthodox.<sup>36</sup> They defended themselves by sowing dissension in the ranks of their opponents.

However, Beecher held the orthodox together, and kept the Unitarians on the defensive until 1826, largely by the obvious success of his revivalistic activity in strengthening the churches. But revivals were a dangerous method to employ. The fires, once lighted, were apt to get out of hand, and all New England shuddered at the memory of the extravagances and excesses of the Great Awakening. It needed but a sensational outbreak of revival activity that could be attributed to the New Haven group, to discountenance Beecher's whole campaign against the Unitarians. And this was provided by the noisy revivals conducted by Charles Grandison Finney in the Presbyterian churches of western New York, a region well known to be closely related to Connecticut Congregationalism.

The Unitarians were quick to seize the opportunity provided to bring Beecher's revivals into disrepute. Their *Christian Examiner* immediately began to call the attention of its readers to the "revolting scenes," and "the extravagances committed of late, in various parts of our country, under the abused name of Revivals of Religion," which were "profanely called" a work of God.<sup>37</sup> Hence, the Unitarian reviewer continued, we are thankful to Finney for thus fully exposing the whole revival system, and "showing to what it must lead, if fully and honestly acted out."<sup>38</sup> And the New England revivalists, although they raised their voices against the excesses, were nevertheless held responsible for them. For it was argued, whoever "begins by countenancing licentious and disorganizing principles," is "responsible for the consequences," even though he does not "foresee, nor wish" them, because "these excesses and outrages . . .

36 The Unitarians had been using this tactic since early in the controversy with the Connecticut orthodox, as a glance through *The Christian Disciple* for the period will indicate. Especially pertinent is the article, "Orthodox Denunciations," (IV [1822], 86-90), in which Ely's *Contrast Between Hopkinsianism and Calvinism*, first published in 1811, was used with telling effectiveness, in pointing out the differences between Hopkinsians of New England and Calvinists of the New York Presbyterian churches. However, it was only when other events combined to cast suspicion on the New Haven group, that the argument became effective.

37 "The Oneida and Troy Revivals," *The Christian Examiner and Theological Review*, IV (1827), 243-265.

38 "Dissensions Among the Revivalists," *The Christian Examiner and Theological Review*, New Series, VI (March, 1829), 104.

follow as the real consequences, and the natural consequences of the revival system."<sup>39</sup>

In vain Beecher and his fellows in New England attempted first to bring Finney around to the use of less sensational measures, which they could defend,<sup>40</sup> and, secondly, to disown Finney and his western revivalists entirely.<sup>41</sup> Try as they might, they could not dissociate themselves from the loud extravagances of the Finney revivals. Both the Unitarians, and the conservatives within the orthodox ranks of New England and the Presbyterian church, blamed the "new measures," as Finney's sensational methods were called, on the New Haven revivalists led by Beecher. This took the last prop from under the leadership of that group, already under suspicion because of their alleged doctrinal aberrations. Thenceforth there was little organized opposition to Unitarianism, as open controversy flared up within the orthodox ranks.

39 *Ibid.*, 104-105.

40 Beecher called the representatives of the New England revivalists to meet with the representatives of Finney and the western revivalists, at Lebanon, New York, in July, 1827. For nine days the two parties discussed their differences, but without arriving at a solution satisfactory to either. The proceedings of the convention were published in full by the Unitarians in *The Christian Examiner and Theological Review*, IV (July and August, 1827), 357-370. Beecher's account of the convention is found in the *Autobiography*, II, 89-108. Finney's account is in his memoirs, 201-225. C. Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston, 1891), 57-95, devotes a chapter to it.

41 *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton, on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion, with a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus* (New York, 1828), vii. Written in part at least, "that it may be at least known, though our heads should then be low in dust, and known by witnesses that we furnished, and that shall survive and faithfully interpret us, that some were NOT their [Finney and his followers] patrons; and especially that such names as NETTLETON, and BEECHER and PORTER, to say nothing of others, were not responsible for their devastation!











